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## **Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: From Miss World to world star**

Martin Shingler

The face of Aishwarya Rai appears on European fashion magazines and on the back of auto-rickshaws in Mumbai. The former Miss World is India's highest paid actress and is one of the few stars to straddle Bollywood and Hollywood (Rosenbaum 2007, 60).

The above statement, by Mumbai-based journalist Alana Rosenbaum, appeared in April 2007 at the start of an article in the Australian media magazine *Metro*. Here the slender, fair-skinned, green-eyed actress Aishwarya Rai was described as the 'queen of Bollywood' and 'the face of L'Oréal cosmetics and Longines watches' but also as a national icon, even a 'source of national pride' (60). The article's main purpose, however, was to explain that Bollywood was changing and that, 'Hindi *masala* movies, in which the hero and villain vie for the heroine accompanied by a chorus of hundreds of singing and dancing extras, are becoming relics of the past' (ibid.). 'Today's Hindi blockbusters look more like Hollywood films,' Rosenbaum writes, citing *Dhoom 2* (Sanjoy Gadhvi, 2006) as an example. In this action movie, Rai plays a seductive double agent, appearing in a succession of skimpy Lycra outfits and performing her first ever on-screen lip-locked kiss. At this time, the newly married Aishwarya Rai Bachchan was regarded as a westernizing influence upon the Indian film industry, importing modern values, attitudes and style that she had acquired when making films in the West. Figure 1.



Figure 1. *The Pink Panther 2*, produced by Sony/MGM, Columbia and Robert Simonds (USA, 2009). Distributed by Sony/MGM.

Two years later, Rai could be seen on cinema screens around the world acting alongside a multi-national cast that included the British actors John Cleese, Jeremy Irons, Emily Mortimer and Alfred Molina, the French actor Jean Reno and the Hollywood-based Japanese actor Yuki Matsuzaki. *The Pink Panther 2* (Harald Zwart, 2009), a star vehicle for American comedian Steve Martin, was made in Hollywood by MGM and Columbia Studios (owned by Sony) and shot on location in Massachusetts, Paris and Rome. As Sonia Solandress, a criminal expert and researcher, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan is the only woman recruited to the international ‘dream team’ assembled to determine the identity of the master-criminal ‘The Tornado’, who appears to be responsible for the theft of the Magna Carta, the Turin shroud and the Imperial sword of Japan, as well as France’s most precious jewel, the Pink Panther. Alongside Vincenzo (Andy Garcia), Pepperidge (Molina) and Kenji (Matsuzaki), Sonia assists Inspector Clouseau (Martin) in his attempts to track down the thief and recover the stolen items. She also represents India here, just as Garcia represents Italy, Molina represents Britain and Matsuzaki represents Japan, each member of the dream team personifying national characteristics. The India that Rai

Bachchan personifies, moreover, is one of modernity, cosmopolitanism and style, hence she is never seen dressed in a sari or salwar kameez. Beautiful, stylish and elegant, Rai exudes star quality throughout the film, despite limited screen time. With this Hollywood production on release around the world in 2009, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan could justifiably be claimed as ‘one of the few stars to straddle Bollywood and Hollywood’ (Rosenbaum, 2007, 60).

The process of straddling Bollywood and Hollywood began in earnest in 1999, with the setting up in the USA of the Bollywood Hollywood Production company, which produced, among other things, *Kites* (Anurag Basu, 2010) starring Hrithik Roshan. Since 2000, when the first annual International Indian Film Awards took place in London, Indian cinema has become increasingly ‘deterritorialized so that its boundaries are no longer identical to those of the nation-state’ (Desai 2004, 39). By 2002, with South Asian culture (for example, mehndis, fashion, interior design, cuisine and bhangra music) all the rage in Britain, Bollywood gained increasing numbers of white British fans (Korte and Sternberg 2004, 135). To cater for this expanding market, Yash-Raj Films, Dharma Productions and Red Chillies Entertainment, among others, began to produce films that marry the distinctiveness of Bollywood with the Hollywood blockbuster, including action thrillers, such as Yash-Raj Films’ *Dhoom:2* but also science-fiction fantasies, such as *Aladin* (Sujoy Ghosh, 2009), which have more universal appeal than the traditional Bollywood family musical. As Jigna Desai observes in *Beyond Bollywood* (2004), ‘those films most likely to circulate transnationally are those that are more “Western friendly,” adopting familiar genres, narratives, or themes in their hybrid productions’ (2004, 45).

In the twenty-first century, most Indian films (like their Hollywood counterparts) are funded through a combination of commercial interests, with success being dependent upon securing distribution deals that require some guarantee of success at the box-office. Stars thus remain vitally important to secure funding for film production, their previous box-office returns being used as a guarantee of future success for any film marketed under their name. It is clear that many of twenty-first century Bollywood’s biggest names have achieved success by appealing largely to members of the Indian diaspora, including Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, Aamir Khan, Madhuri Dixit, Salman Khan, Rani Mukerji and Hrithik Roshan. Despite having a

huge international fan-base however, very few of these have made English-language films in Europe or America.

Sabrina Qiong Yu has made an important distinction between ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ stardom, arguing that while an ‘international star’ may achieve global recognition by making films exclusively in their own country, ‘a transnational star needs to physically transfer from one film industry to another to make films, often in a different language from his or her own’ (2012, 2). While Shah Rukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit and Abhishek Bachchan are better described as ‘international stars’ given that they work exclusively within the Indian film industry, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan qualifies for the designation of ‘transnational star’ since she has made a number of English-language films in Europe and the USA. She became a ‘transnational’ star in 2004, ten years after winning the 1994 Miss World competition in South Africa, when she took the leading role in Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride & Prejudice* (2004). By this time, she was Bollywood’s number one female star.

Between 1997 and 2010, Aishwarya Rai made over 40 films, including Hindi, Bengali and Tamil productions. Following her film debut in Mani Ratnam’s acclaimed Tamil film *Iruvar/The Duo* (1997), she made her first Hindi film, ...*Aur Pyaar Ho Gaya/Come Let Us Fall in Love* (Rahul Rawail, 1997), before her breakthrough came with the Tamil comedy *Jeans* (S. Shankar, 1998) set in Los Angeles and Madras. This hit movie established Rai as both a fine comedienne and a representative of modern cosmopolitan femininity. Thereafter, she was nominated for a string of prestigious Filmfare awards, winning Best Actress for her role in Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s spectacular Hindi musical romance *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam/Straight from the Heart* (1999), which Ken Eisner praised in *Variety* as a ‘non stop hoot’ (2000, 26). However, it was Bhansali’s remake of *Devdas* in 2002 that transformed Rai into Bollywood’s top female, enabling her to eclipse her co-star Madhuri Dixit, the queen of Indian popular cinema from the mid-1990s. The scenes in which Rai and Dixit appeared together were among the film’s highlights, receiving praise from *Variety* reviewer Derek Elley, who wrote that the ‘gamine, almost Audrey Hepburn-like Rai strikes sparks off the older but still vivacious Dixit’ (2000a, 25). After being nominated in Britain for a BAFTA award for Best Non-English Language

Film, *Devdas* became a huge global hit and propelled Rai to international superstardom.

For the next eight years, Rai dominated Bollywood as the industry's number one box-office female. While enjoying commercial success with mainstream romantic comedies such as *Kuch Naa Kaho/Love Can't Be Arranged* (Rohan Sippy, 2003), she also won praise for more artistic work, such as *Raincoat* (2004), written and directed by the acclaimed Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh. Meanwhile, in 2004 and 2005, the fair-skinned actress was used by L'Oréal in India to promote its skin whitening cream 'White Perfect', resulting in large numbers of middle-class Indian women adopting her image of 'cosmopolitan transnational femininity by lightening or whitening their skin' (Osuri 2008, 118). Goldie Osuri, in her essay 'Ash-Coloured Whiteness: The Transfiguration of Aishwarya Rai', discusses the matrix of elements that has enabled the transnational circulation of Rai and, most notably, the way she has been used to embody notions of gendered beauty and skin colour. She argues, for instance, that Rai was able to 'travel transnationally, as part of L'Oréal's dream team of international celebrities on the pages of cosmetic advertisements, through the complicity of approximating whiteness' (ibid.). She also notes that 'the fact that one could not place her racial/ethnic background appeared to be part of her allure' (ii6). Clearly, Rai's fair skin and the ambiguity of her racial/ethnic origins, which secured her a place in L'Oréal's line-up of international celebrities, not only contributed towards her mega-stardom in Bollywood but also brought offers of work from the West. Thus, in 2004, she began making English-language films in Europe and the USA while continuing to work in India.

After marrying her *Kuch Naa Kaho* co-star Abhishek Bachchan in April 2007, she appeared as 'Aishwarya Rai Bachchan' in several Bollywood movies with her husband, including *Umrao Jaan* (J.P. Dutta, 2006), *Dhoom:2*, *Guru* (Mani Ratnam, 2007), *Sarkar Raj* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2008) and *Raavan* (Mani Ratnam, 2010), in addition to co-starring with Bollywood heart-throb Hrithik Roshan in *Johaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) and *Guzaarish/The Request* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2010). In 2011, Rai began an extended career break and, since the birth of her first child (daughter Aaradhya Bachchan), she has concentrated on child-rearing and advertising campaigns for major multi-national products, including Lux soap. One

might easily conclude that in 2010, prior to taking her extended career break, Rai Bachchan had given up her transnational film career choosing to concentrate on more lucrative and popular films made in India. One might also conclude that the five films she made abroad between 2004 and 2009 represent neither her most commercially successful productions nor her greatest acting achievements. Nevertheless, as I shall argue below, these transnational films do present her at her most versatile as an actress. By concentrating largely on her British co-productions *Bride & Prejudice* (, *The Mistress of Spices* (Paul Mayeda Berges, 2005) and *Provoked: A True Story* (Jagmohan Mundhra, 2006), this article will explore the ways in which these have enabled Rai to expand her range of characters and performance methods beyond the scope of a leading Bollywood actress, while also extending her fan-base even more widely across the world.

### **Rai's Anglo-American Chadha-Mayeda Berges' Films, *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) and *The Mistress of Spices* (2005)**

Aishwarya Rai's first two transnational films were co-written and directed by Britain's leading Asian film director Gurinder Chadha and her Japanese-American husband Paul Mayeda Berges, following the spectacular success of their British Asian comedy *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), which 'surpassed all box office expectations, earning approximately 26 million dollars at the U.S. box offices alone' (Desai 2004, 50). Together with Los Angeles-based producer Deepak Nayar,<sup>1</sup> they won the backing of the British-based Pathé Pictures International and the American distributor Miramax, gaining sufficient funds to shoot on location in India and the USA, as well as employ two of India's leading film professionals, award-winning choreographer Saroj Khan and cinematographer Santosh Sivan.<sup>2</sup> They also had enough funding to hire Bollywood's top female star for the leading role in their musical comedy *Bride & Prejudice*, which translated 'the marriage plot of Jane Austen's early nineteenth-century novel *Pride and Prejudice* into the milieu of an Asian and non-Asian global elite,' capitalizing on the growing international appeal of Bollywood as well as the Jane Austen revival (Korte and Sternberg 2008, 393).<sup>3</sup> In so doing, Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg argue, *Bride & Prejudice* 'contributes both to the corpus of Bollywood-style romance, and to British film and television adaptations of literary

classics' (ibid.). Korte and Sternberg also observe that it, 'ties in with other films celebrating modern middle-class Indianness (such as Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, 2001)' (ibid.).

In the early 2000s, there were several attempts to create a Bollywood-style movie in the West: most notably *Monsoon Wedding* in the USA, *Bollywood/Hollywood* (Deepa Mehta, 2002) in Canada and *Bollywood Queen* (Jeremy Wooding, 2002) in the UK. These were largely inspired by the Bollywood wedding film; most notably Sooraj Barjatya's hugely successful *Hum Aapke Hain Koun/Who Am I to You?* (1994) starring Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit, which generated many copycat versions in the mid to late 1990s. In 2000, the formula was still going strong, as evidenced by the success of *Dhai Akshar Prem Ka/Two and a Half Syllables of Love* (Raj Kanwar), starring Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai (Deshpande 2005, 198). As the star of *Bride & Prejudice*, Rai established a direct link with this major Bollywood genre. To assist her in this, other notable Bollywood actors were also hired, such as Anupam Kher and Namrata Shirodkar.<sup>4</sup> These Bollywood actors were teamed with others drawn from British cinema and television, including Naveen Andrews and Nitin Ganatra.<sup>5</sup> While this diversity of players added to the cultural richness of *Bride & Prejudice*, it also made it a rather fragmented text (see Geraghty 2006, 167).

However, the most problematic casting in *Bride & Prejudice* was the role of the leading man to play opposite Rai as her wealthy American suitor and sparring partner Will Darcy. Australian actor Martin Henderson took the role, after making a name for himself in America in the Dreamworks' remake of the Japanese horror movie *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002), opposite Naomi Watts.<sup>6</sup> His performance as Darcy, however, failed to impress *Variety* critic Derek Elley, who noted a lack of chemistry between Rai and Henderson, in addition to the contrast between Rai 'at her most relaxed' and Henderson as 'good-looking but unengaging' as Will Darcy (2004, 52). Christine Geraghty has also commented on Henderson's unease in 'taking on the modes of performance demanded by Indian cinema', pointing out that his 'star status clearly cannot match that of Rai,' and describing his acting as 'awkward and uneasy for much of the time' (2008, 42). In a film so heavily reliant upon the screen chemistry of its leading male and female, this proved to be a major obstacle to securing a global box-office hit.

It was never going to be easy to successfully marry the diverse qualities of British, Bollywood and Hollywood cinema nor to match the box-office takings of *Devdas* or *Bend It Like Beckham*. However, while the film's financial returns fell short of its producer's expectations, *Bride & Prejudice* did earn \$6.6 million in the USA alone, which is a significant commercial achievement even though it is less than a quarter of the gross for *Bend It Like Beckham*.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the film failed to secure a long-run in movies theatres in either India or the West. Nor did it receive any major awards or rave reviews. In the UK, *Sight & Sound*'s reviewer declared that it 'ranges from the exhilarating to the execrable', describing the performances as 'mostly over the top' and 'in keeping with Bollywood conventions' (Ramachandran 2004, 44). Naman Ramachandran wrote that, 'former Miss World and Indian box-office darling Aishwarya Rai does a passable Lalita (Elizabeth), even if her delivery hovers uneasily between a normal Indian tone and over-coached enunciation' (ibid.).

In Australia, a much more vitriolic response appeared in the magazine *Metro*, where Sapna Samant (organizer of the Asia Film Festival Aotearoa) denounced *Bride & Prejudice* as a Bollywood impostor (2005, 83). The author's anger was palpable, particularly when declaring that she didn't 'like those Johnny-come-lately, ignorant Westerners and media people advising me about it' (i.e., Bollywood) and warning her readers not to 'be fooled by "Bollywood" films made by Gurinder Chadha-types and marketed by Miramax know-it-alls' (86). Curiously, given the film's numerous anti-American sentiments, *Bride & Prejudice* fared better in the USA, *Variety* announcing that it had an 'immensely likable, almost goofily playful charm' (Elley 2004, p. 52). Here, Derek Elley noted Rai's 'spirited performance' in a film that sets 'itself up as a target for cultural purists', claiming that the film 'triumphs with its devil-may-care, good-humored fun' (ibid.). 'Stylistically,' he wrote, 'the movie inhabits a cultural sphere that [...] is absolutely its own, infused with a love of the conventions of mainstream Indian cinema but packaged with a Non-Resident Indian's sensibilities and affinity for British sitcom characters' (ibid.). Having previously denounced Deepa Mehta's *Bollywood/Hollywood* in 2002 for, 'Lacking any kind of nuance, and oozing a self-satisfied smirk at its own dandy cleverness', Elley found much more to celebrate in this latest attempt to climb upon the Bollywood bandwagon (2002b, 34). The same reviewer, however, was less enthusiastic about Rai's second Anglo-American production, describing *The Mistress of Spices* as, 'Beautiful but lifeless,

poetic but unelevated’, concluding that it was a ‘brave but flawed attempt at that most unforgiving of contemporary genres, magic realism’ (2006, 32). Elley also noted that the film, ‘trades too much on the porcelain beauty of lead thesp Aishwarya Rai’ (ibid.).

Based on Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni’s magic realist novel of the same name (1997), *The Mistress of Spices* tells the story of Tilo (Rai), an Indian woman who runs a spice shop in Oakland, San Francisco, and Doug (Dylan McDermott), an architect with Native American ancestry, with whom she falls in love and, consequently, loses her powers of perception, along with her ability to cure her customers with her spices. Dreamy and slow, the film has more in common with Lasse Hallström’s *Chocolat* (2000) than *Bride & Prejudice* or any Bollywood family film. With restrained performances from the cast (which includes Anupam Kher and Nitin Ganatra from *Bride & Prejudice*), the film focuses attention on the setting of the spice shop, beautifully framed and lit by Santosh Sivan’s cinematography.<sup>8</sup>

This was a project that the cast and crew were keen to make out of a commitment to the story and the chance to work together once more. Commercial imperatives played a lesser role, making it both a labour of love and rather self-indulgent, as many reviewers noted on its release. In Britain, where it received a lukewarm reception, Wendy Ide wrote in *The Times* that, ‘[t]his curry-flavoured Mills and Boon romance brings no surprises’, describing it as ‘all rather tiresome’ (2006, 16). Derek Malcolm, in London’s *Evening Standard*, acknowledged that Rai’s ‘presence at least means that there is always something attractive to look at when all else fails’ but nevertheless complained that, ‘whimsy is never far away, and this odd tale [...] isn’t another *Bend it Like Beckham*’ (2006, 35). Similarly, *Empire* magazine’s Anna Smith suggested that it was largely Rai’s ‘screen presence’ that ‘keeps this consistently watchable’ (2006, 45). However, Kate Stables, in *Sight & Sound*, observed that this only worked up to a point:

When the screen is brimful of Ash, the film’s shortcomings are almost forgivable. That is, until Tilo has an extreme make-over, relinquishing her demure sari-and-sandalwood garb for a blast of red-hot sequined glamour that threatens to derail the film altogether (2006, 63).

Although neither a commercial nor critical success, *The Mistress of Spices* gave Aishwarya Rai a chance to perform in a very different register to her Bollywood movies. One significant element that it introduced to her work lay in the high degree of interiority assigned to her character through her use of internal monologue via voice-over, heard consistently throughout the film. Rarely in a Bollywood production had Rai's voice been heard so much and very seldom had it been detached from her image and body as a voice-over. Here, the film grants considerable weight to her vocal work, to the expressive qualities of her vocal tones in particular. Having proven that she could perform in English in *Bride & Prejudice*, Rai's talents as a voice artist were showcased in her second Anglo-American film, demonstrating that her appeal did not lie exclusively in her good looks. Moreover, with extensive voice work, Rai concentrated her performance on subtle details (for example, the look in her eyes), producing a pared down performance style that she utilized even more fully in her next British film. Figure 2.



Figure 2. *The Mistress of Spices*, produced by Balle Pictures, Capitol Films and Ingenious Film Partners (USA/UK, 2005). Distributed by the Weinstein Company and Entertainment Film Distributors.

### **Rai's Anglo-Indian Film, *Provoked: A True Story***

A British-Indian co-production filmed in London, *Provoked: A True Story* was based on the real-life case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, who served time in a women's prison in London for fatally setting fire to her husband after suffering years of domestic violence. Following a protest campaign led by the Southall Sisters, her sentence was eventually reduced on the grounds of diminished responsibility, provoking a change in British law. Based on Ahluwalia's autobiography *Circle of Light* (1997), the film is stylistically much more in keeping with British independent movies than either diasporic Indian films or Bollywood musicals, eschewing lavish costumes, colourful cinematography and song and dance numbers for a low-key aesthetic. This film, however, was not made by a British director but rather by the US-based Indian director Jagmohan Mundhra, a specialist in low-budget erotica (mainly aimed at the video market, and often containing scenes of violence). For both director and star, this was a surprising project. As Mihir Bose records in *Bollywood: A History*, 'Aishwarya Rai's presence in the film [...] was the talking point,' stimulating 'much speculation [...] as to why she would want to play a battered wife', producing a rumour that this was linked to the break-up of her relationship with Bollywood bad boy Salman Khan (2006, 342). Indeed, the British journalist Martyn Palmer, when interviewing Rai for *The Times* magazine shortly before *Provoked's* release in the UK, reminded the actress of the gossip about Khan having once given her a black-eye. Although she would not confirm these reports, she did admit to having experienced intimidation in her personal life (2007, 42).

Sexual and physical abuse may or may not have featured in Rai's personal life in the early 2000s but it certainly featured in her films; most notably, in *Hamara Dil Aapke Paas Hai/You Have My Heart* (Satish Kaushik, 2000) and Bhansali's 2002 remake of *Devdas*. In the former, Rai plays a young woman who is raped in retaliation for providing a witness statement to the police that leads to the conviction of a crime baron. Meanwhile, in *Devdas*, Rai's character Paro is frequently teased and even physically abused by the film's main protagonist Devdas Mukerji (Shah Rukh Khan), including being struck across the forehead and scarred by a piece of heavy jewelry on the eve of her wedding to another man. Throughout the first half of the

film, physical abuse not only forms a significant part of the relationship between Paro and Devdas but is heavily romanticized to the point of making cruelty within a romantic relationship seem glamorous. In contrast, there is nothing glamorous about the abuse depicted in *Provoked*. Here, a series of flashbacks reveal how Deepak Ahluwalia (Naveen Andrews) subjected his wife Kiranjit (Rai) to frequent acts of violence, often fueled by alcohol, such as slapping her so hard across the face that she is knocked to the ground. Despite multiple injuries, Kiranjit refuses to acknowledge her husband's brutality or seek help, even when raped. Finally, however, having been threatened with a hot iron, she retaliates by setting fire to him while he lies asleep in bed.

Although, *Provoked*'s most dramatic scenes are played opposite Naveen Andrews as the abusive husband, much of the film sees Rai performing with fellow actresses; most notably, Miranda Richardson (as her cellmate Ronnie) but also Nandita Das (as the leader of the Southall Sisters).<sup>9</sup> Despite this strong female cast, and despite having relatively little dialogue, Rai commands attention throughout the film. For the most part, she speaks very little and when she does it is in broken English. Playing a repressed and traumatised character who's first language is Punjabi, Rai mainly uses her eyes to convey her character's thoughts and feelings, her reactions to the situations in which she finds herself. Rai's large green eyes had never been more eloquent, registering her character's every emotion; confusion, shock, fear, pain and, ultimately, a sense of freedom. However, as Lisa Mullen noted when reviewing the film for *Sight & Sound*, 'the magnetism of her [Rai's] central performance is at times all that holds this chaotic but likeable piece together' (2007, 65). Consequently, despite its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, *Provoked* failed to win any awards and struggled to gain distribution, so that only a small minority of Rai's fans around the world got to see her subtle and subdued performance.

### **Rai's Multi-National Co-Productions, *The Last Legion* (2007) and *Pink Panther 2* (2009)**

Having starred in three international co-productions, Rai branched out further in the mid to late 2000s by headlining in two major transnational movies, one made in Europe, the other in Hollywood. Although neither film was commercially or critically successful, both projects enabled her to work with some acclaimed actors: most notably, Ben Kingsley, the British-born actor of Gujrati descent, who made his name by playing Mahatma Gandhi in Richard Attenborough's celebrated 1982 bio-pic of India's 'father of independence'.<sup>10</sup> Alongside Colin Firth, Kingsley led the cast of *The Last Legion*, an historical fantasy action adventure, based on a screenplay by Jez Butterworth and produced by the Dino De Laurentiis Company (USA), Quinta Communications (France) and Ingenious Film Partners (UK). Establishing a direct link between the fall of the Roman Empire and the birth of Camelot, this film recounts how Merlin, in his guise as Ambrosinus (Kingsley), accompanied his twelve year old pupil Romulus Augustus (Thomas Sangster) to a prison on the island of Capri, where they discover the sword destined to become known as Excalibur. Aided by a group of Roman and Turkish soldiers, led by Aurelius (Firth), they escape captivity from the Goths and flee to Britannia to join the Roman army's 9<sup>th</sup> legion. As the film's female lead, Aishwarya Rai plays the warrior Mira, a woman from South Kerala recruited into the militia of the Eastern Roman Empire, who joins forces with Aurelius, eventually falling in love with him. Having joined a distinguished group of actors in a rather undistinguished movie, Rai discovered that her role required skills in martial arts and stunt-work more than nuanced acting. Upon its release, the film met with a mixed reaction, most critics finding it weak but likeable. In the US, Joe Leydon informed readers of *Variety* that, despite a 'half-hearted promotional campaign,' the film itself 'isn't half bad', noting that Rai in her role as a 'sword-swinging Byzantine beauty' is 'extremely easy on the eyes' (2007, 104). Similarly, in the UK, Anna Smith informed readers of *Empire* magazine that the 'action is fitfully fun and Aishwarya Rai shines as a Byzantine babe' (2007, 94). Although Nicholas Barber, in the *Independent on Sunday*, scoffed at Colin Firth's 'multicultural sidekicks' and Aishwarya Rai's fighting style, which 'centres on cleavage and pointless twirling', he concluded that '*The Last Legion* is bad in such a bountiful, Pythonesque way [...] that it falls into the tiny "so bad it's good" category' (2007, 71).

The same, however, could not be said of *The Pink Panther 2*, which was widely condemned as unfunny, poorly acted and over-cast. On this occasion, Nicholas Barber noted the film's 'talent-squandering,' remarking upon the fact that so many of the movie's big names had so little to do (2009, 57). In the *Daily Telegraph*, Sukhdev Sandhu observed that 'the star quotient has been upped to create a polyglot cast whose members don't gel but which will ensure the film maximum publicity across a wide range of territories' (2009, 25). Meanwhile, Charlotte O'Sullivan, in London's *Evening Standard*, insisted that, '[t]he cast are not so much bad as helpless' (2009, 40). Even though Rai's character turns out to be the mastermind behind the spectacularly audacious international robberies, she makes relatively few and only brief appearances, often glimpsed in the background, seeming uncertain of her role in the scene and having minimal dialogue. The same could also be said of her co-stars, including Yuki Matsuzaki, Alfred Molina and Andy Garcia. In *The Times*, James Christopher noted that, 'The film is amply stocked with actors who ought to know better' (2009, 18). William Thomas, in *Empire* magazine, meanwhile, argued that Steve Martin should have been surrounded 'with funny people, rather than serious thesp co-stars' (2009, 48). Although all of this boded ill for Aishwarya Rai Bachchan's one and only Hollywood picture, she had at least been considered worthy of the appellation 'serious thespian': in other words, a dramatic actor whose work (even in comedy) deserves to be taken seriously.

## Conclusion

Aishwarya Rai's five non-Bollywood productions were all different from each other and they also impacted differently upon her stardom. *Bride & Prejudice* helped to raise her star profile among non-Asian movie-goers in the West. The perfect transitional project, it enabled her to exploit her Bollywood persona and acting style, while showcasing her ability to perform in English alongside western actors. On the back of this film, American critics began to herald her Hollywood break-through. US film magazine *Premiere* introduced its readers to Rai in December 2004 by stating that, '[w]ith *Bride and Prejudice*, Aishwarya Rai prepares to conquer Hollywood' and calling her 'the most famous actress you've never heard of' (Devlin 2004, 31). Although *Bride & Prejudice* failed to turn Rai into a Hollywood star, it did establish

for her a congenial working relationship with a multi-national and multi-cultural production team with whom she worked again on *The Mistress of Spices*. Here she produced a much more subdued performance that showcased her voice in particular. *Provoked*, her third and final British production, highlighted the subtlety of her dramatic acting skills alongside Miranda Richardson, one of Britain's finest actors. By this time, she was being compared to Britain's biggest female stars; *The Times* magazine carried the description of her as a combination of 'Keira Knightley meets Catherine Zeta-Jones with added Kate Winslet' (Palmer 2007, 39). In this same article, she was reported to be in talks with Robert de Nero, as well as being about to play an abused prostitute in a film called *Chaos* with Meryl Streep (41). Although this project failed to materialize and Rai did not become a major star in Hollywood, she did subsequently perform opposite some of the world's best actors, such as Ben Kingsley and Colin Firth, while showcasing her more action-oriented skills in *The Last Legion*. Finally, in her one and only Hollywood movie, *The Pink Panther 2*, Rai personified modern India as a representative of an international 'dream team.'

During the course of making these five films between 2004 and 2009, Rai moved further away from her initial fame as a beauty queen to occupy a place on the world stage as one of India's most accomplished and versatile actresses, as at home in British films as Bollywood musicals, as competent in small-scale gritty prison dramas as spectacular historical action adventures, as adept at comedy as drama. While none of these movies matched the box-office returns and critical acclaim of her best Bollywood films, they nonetheless made her India's most successful transnational star of the 2000s. There is little evidence that they significantly influenced her casting in subsequent Bollywood movies or noticeably changed her acting style in popular Indian cinema. Nevertheless, they undoubtedly gave her opportunities to work in different contexts, with different types of filmmakers and embrace different roles and performance methods. In her interview for *The Times* magazine in 2007, Rai discussed her reasons for working outside the Indian film industry:

It's not about greener pastures or having stardust in my eyes [...] But it's the fact that these opportunities are coming my way. I didn't go seeking it, but if it's coming then I'd like to contribute to India's presence on the international platform. [...] I've been doing things that people might not have expected coming

from my background - modeling, Miss World. But I like breaking out of these compartments' (Palmer, 2007, 41).

As this statement indicates, Rai has gone out of her way to defy expectations, including the assumption that, as a former beauty queen, her film stardom results from her good looks rather than her skill and versatility as a screen performer. However, as Palmer's interview with Rai also indicated, the actress is proud to act as a global representative for 21st century India. 'Representing India,' Palmer wrote, and 'being seen as the face of an increasingly confident, outward-looking country - is important to her' (42).

While Rai has represented a modern India as a movie star, she has also provided an important role model to a younger generation of Indian performers, such as the model-turned-actress Preity Zinta, who is currently one of Bollywood's leading ladies, one who combines Bollywood productions with making films in the West.<sup>11</sup> For Zinta's generation, Rai has proven that it is not only possible for a beauty queen to become a movie star in India but also that a Bollywood star can successfully adapt to western film-making conventions, styles and genres. However, for all her beauty, versatility, talent and charm, Rai's transnational films have neither earned her awards nor a series of commercially successful Hollywood star vehicles. If Rai has been unable to achieve these with her abundant star qualities, what is the likelihood that another Bollywood star might do so? Clearly, this remains a significant challenge for Zinta and her compatriots. Nevertheless, the fact remains, one day one of Bollywood's most talented and charismatic stars will indeed win an Oscar for a starring role in a commercially successful Hollywood movie and go on to become one of the top stars working in Los Angeles. The burning question is, if not Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, who will that be?

## Notes

1 Deepak Nayar had previously produced David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and Wim Wender's *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), as well as Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*.

2 Saroj Khan had been choreographing dance numbers in Bollywood films since 1960, including *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), *Taal* (Subhash Ghai, 1999), *Devdas* (2002) and *Kuch Naa Kaho*. Santosh Sivan had been working as a cinematographer since 1989, with major projects including Shah Rukh Khan's *Dil Se../From the Heart* (Mani Ratnam, 1998).

3 Previous hit Austen adaptations included Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), a contemporary American version of *Emma*, Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996), Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999) and a Tamil language version of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Kandukondain Kandukondain/I Have Found It* (Rajiv Menon, 2000), with Aishwarya Rai.

4 Anupam Kher, who plays Rai's father in *Bride & Prejudice* (Chaman Bakshi/Mr Bennett) appears in an extraordinary number of Bollywood movies, including *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge/The Brave Hearted will Take the Bride* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), *...Aur Pyaar Ho Gaya* (1997) and *Mohabbatein/Love Stories* (Aditya Chopra, 2000). Bollywood actress Namrata Shirodkar, who plays Rai's older sister Jaya Bakshi (Jane Bennett) in *Bride & Prejudice*, had previously appeared in *Tehzeeb/Etiquette* (Khalid Mohamed, 2003), *Pukar/Call* (Rajkumar Santoshi, 2000) and *Vaastav/The Reality* (Mahesh Manjrekar, 1999) and, in 2001, performed with Aishwarya Rai in the comedy *Albela/Besotted* (Deepak Sareen).

5 Naveen Andrews, who plays Balraj (Bingley), had previously appeared in Hanif Kureishi's *London Kills Me* (1991) and *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993), as well as *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996) and *Bombay Boys* (Kaizad Gustad, 1998). Meanwhile, Nitin Ganatra, who provides many of the comedy highlights of *Bride & Prejudice* in his role as Rai's Asian-American suitor Mr Kolhi (Mr Collins), had previously featured in British drama serials and series, such as *Holby City* (2003-

4) and *Silent Witness* (2002), having originally made his film debut in Anthony Minghella's *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1990) and appeared in Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996).

6 Martin Henderson's movie break-through came in 1999 with the Australia sports drama *Kick* (Lynda Heys), following a stint in the Australian television soap opera *Home and Away* in 1996.

7 See [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) (accessed 16 April 2013).

8 Rai's leading man here was Golden Globe-winning American actor Dylan McDermott, who had previously appeared in supporting roles in Julia Roberts' *Steel Magnolias* (Herbert Ross, 1989), Clint Eastwood's *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1993), Richard Attenborough's *Miracle of 34th Street* (Les Mayfield, 1994) and Val Kilmer's *Wonderland* (James Cox, 2003). Despite these credentials, his performance with Rai failed to impress *Variety* critic Derek Elley, who wrote that the leads failed to connect, lacking any real 'verve' to their performances, resulting in them being over-shadowed by the production design of the spice store (2006, 32).

9 Miranda Richardson made her name playing destructive and erratic women, such as Ruth Ellis (the last woman to be executed for murder in Britain) in *Dance with a Stranger* (Mike Newell, 1985). Further acclaimed roles include *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), *Damage* (Louis Malle, 1992), *Tom and Viv* (Brian Gilbert, 1994), and *The Hours* (Stephan Daldry, 2002). Nandita Das achieved fame for her role in Deepa Mehta's lesbian drama *Fire* (1996), and also starred in Jag Mundhra's *Bawandar/Sandstorm* (2000) and Mrinal Sen's *Aamaar Bhuvan/My Land* (2002).

10 After winning both an Academy Award and a BAFTA for his title role in *Gandhi* (1982), Ben Kingsley (formerly, Krishna Bhanji) carved out an illustrious film career in Britain and Hollywood, with films such as *Bugsy* (Barry Levinson, 1991), *Schindler's List* (Stephen Spielberg, 1993), *Death and the Maiden* (Roman Polanski 1994) and *Oliver Twist* (Polanski, 2005).

11 Having made her acting debut in Shah Rukh Khan's *Dil Se..* in 1998, Preity Zinta went on to take the female lead of Shah Rukh Khan's *Kal Ho Naa Ho/Tomorrow May Not Come* (2003) and subsequently starred in Deepa Mehta's *Heaven on Earth*

(2008), made in Canada, as well as Prem Soni's *Ishkq in Paris* (2013), with Isabelle Adjani.

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